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SUBJECT: HALKI SEMINARY READY FOR BUSINESS

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11. (SBU) Summary: We visited the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Halki Seminary with a delegation of Greek Orthodox American citizens during their annual Feast of St. Andrew pilgrimage to Istanbul, coinciding this year with Pope Benedict XVI's trip to Turkey. The seminary is the subject of a long-standing dispute with the Government of Turkey (GOT), which closed the theological school in 1971 after passing a law prohibiting private religious institutions of higher education. Though comments made by the current GOT indicating a willingness to re-open the seminary have yet to bear fruit, we saw an institution that was ready to open its doors as soon as it receives permission to do so. End summary.

The Voyage

12. (SBU) Consulate staff joined a group of 150 Greek Orthodox American citizens November 27 to tour the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Theological School of Halki. The distance between Istanbul city limits and Heybeli Island, where Halki seminary is located, is measured not only in nautical miles but also in time. There are no cars on the island and were it not for the Coca Cola sign which greets visitors as they disembark, and the ubiquitous satellite dishes, the island would appear to be much the same as it was when the seminary first opened its doors in 1844. The reverence directed at Hagia Sophia as the ferry passed the Byzantine-era Orthodox cathedral (now a museum) on the way to the island was palpable, and suggested that some of our fellow passengers might have wished to go back much further in time. One, when offered a Turkish coffee by a fellow pilgrim, exclaimed with disgust, "I prefer to call it 'Greek' coffee."

The Dispute

13. (SBU) Time appears to have stood still for Halki Seminary since 1971, when it closed its doors to students subsequent to the GOT's passing of a regulation nationalizing all private institutions of higher learning. (At the time, this was a post-coup measure put in place to try to gain control of the universities/student populations that had participated in country-wide rioting). Despite private commitments and public declarations by members of the current Truth and Development Party (AKP)-led Administration indicating a

willingness to re-open the school (reftel), no action has been taken. Meanwhile, the Ecumenical Patriarchate laments that seminarians must seek training elsewhere and often do not return to Turkey. Since current Turkish law requires that the successor to any Patriarch be a Turkish national, adherents believe keeping the seminary closed is a tactic designed to figuratively cut off the main artery feeding the heart of the Greek Orthodox church, effectively killing the institution.

The Tour

¶4. (SBU) Horse-drawn carriages took us from the ferry to the top of a hill and the front gates of the Halki Theological School. Walking through the gates, we were immediately struck by two sights. The first was the impeccable care with which the grounds were maintained--palm trees and flowers in bloom belied the calendar month and the island's geographical position. The second, belying the disputed status of the seminary itself, was a prominent plaque accompanying a bust of Ataturk, citing his famous mantra, "Peace at Home, Peace in the World."

¶5. (SBU) Metropolitan Apostolos, abbot of the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, greeted us on the front steps and took us to the monastery's small church where he subsequently led a short religious ceremony under the gilded icons of the church walls. The Consul General was invited to say a few words at its conclusion and we were then escorted to the school's auditorium where, under the watchful gaze of the life-size portraits of former Halki faculty members, a Fordham University professor of theology delivered a briefing about the nature of the "Grand Schism" between the Orthodox and Catholic churches. The Consul General was again invited to speak, and cited ongoing USG support for the re-opening of the Halki Seminary and the continued health and survival of

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the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Our hosts then served the entire delegation a four-course lunch in the cafeteria and for the first time, it was possible to imagine how the school must have appeared in the past with a full community of students and faculty.

¶6. (SBU) We continued our tour through the school's long corridors, our voices echoing between the marble floors and cathedral ceilings. The classrooms flanking the hallways appeared just as they did 35 years ago, with 19th century wooden desks lined up in columns and rows waiting for the opportunity to host their next round of students. The beds in the dormitories were carefully made up with fresh linens. We ended our visit at the school's impressive library, which dates back to the Byzantine era and includes over 50,000 volumes, some of which are over a thousand years old, as well as an extensive up-to-date periodical collection which is used today by visiting academics, theologians and researchers.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: Halki seminary, though only one aspect of a much larger dispute between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the GOT involving the Patriarchate's legal identity and property confiscations, has become symbolic of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's overall plight. The GOT previously has indicated a willingness to open the school under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. Though the Ecumenical Patriarchate is agreeable in principle to such an arrangement, rifts concerning the level of autonomy granted in the school's administration keep the two sides from finding a solution. In the past, Kemalist-oriented governments refused to open Halki out of fear that doing so would lead to similar rights being afforded to Imam Hatip (Islamic preacher) vocational schools; other sources tell us that while the AK government was prepared to re-open the seminary, the Turkish military remains staunchly opposed to

reopenng what it believes has the potential for creating a
"nest of spies" or the beginnings of a "state within a
state," a la the Vatican, in secularist Turkey. Ecumenical
Patriarchate sources tell us--and our tour observations would
support their statements--that if and when a solution is
found, they have a team ready to staff Halki Seminary and
open its doors immediately. End comment.
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